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Afghanistan Halfway through the Transition Phase

Shortcomings of the Security Transition and Remaining Options for NATO

Nils Wörmer

Progress with regard to building up Afghanistan's National Security Forces, improving the governance performance of the incumbent regime, pursuing a domestic peace process, cooperating with Afghanistan's neighbors (particularly Pakistan and Iran), and creating prospects for economic development have been defined as preconditions for the successful transition of security responsibilities in Afghanistan. However, one and a half years after the security transition phase was officially launched by the Afghan government, NATO has been experiencing severe difficulties in the outlined fields of activity. US policy and NATO's strategy toward Afghanistan seem at least partly deadlocked. Western policymakers have few remaining options for the second half of the security transition in Afghanistan. These include focusing on the two key players in the Afghan conflict, namely strengthening the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and weakening the senior leadership of the Afghan Taliban.

In July 2011, almost a decade after the Islamic Emirate of the Taliban had been toppled by an American-led international military force, NATO and the Afghan government launched the "security transition." This process has entailed the step-by-step handover of security responsibilities from NATO to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and is being accompanied by the withdrawal of NATO's combat forces. The "transition phase" is due to be concluded by December 2014. By that point, Afghanistan will have regained its full sovereignty. The international community has already defined the phase that will

follow the "transition" and named it the "transformation phase", which is scheduled for the years 2015 to 2024. For this period, NATO already announced a follow-up mission to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) without combat operations but rather a focus on training and advising the ANSF.

The security transition between mid-2011 and the end of 2014 is part of a strategy of NATO and the Afghan government that derives from the January 2010 International Conference in London, the July 2010 Kabul International Conference, the December 2011 International Afghanistan

Conference in Bonn, and the NATO summits of Lisbon (2010) and Chicago (2012). According to repeated announcements of Western politicians, there are a number of issues that have to be dealt with in order for the current strategy on Afghanistan to succeed. These issues include: (1) the formation of Afghanistan's security forces, particularly the Afghan National Police (ANP) and the Afghan National Army (ANA); (2) a "good governance performance" and an anti-corruption campaign by the Afghan government; (3) the domestic peace and reconciliation process; (4) regional cooperation on the part of Afghanistan's neighboring countries, first and foremost Pakistan and Iran; and (5) the creation of prospects for economic development. In other words, because progress in these areas has been defined as a pre-condition for reaching (a) the short-term goal of transferring security responsibilities to Afghan authorities and (b) the long-term goal of permanently stabilizing the country, we have to examine these five issues in order to assess whether NATO's strategy is working or not.

Key areas during the transition

The build-up of the ANSF. Throughout 2012 NATO and the Afghan government managed to increase the total number of servicemen in the ANSF to nearly 352,000, which was the planned target number. However, it has been reported that up to one-third of the ANSF's personnel have to be substituted annually due to combat losses, desertion, and attrition. This undermines any efforts to create internal cohesion in these newly formed organizations. This is being exacerbated by the fact that NATO already announced reductions to the ANSF of one-third to about 230,000 servicemen in 2016. Furthermore, the ANSF are lacking a clear distinction of whom to fight and what to defend. According to the Western donors' philosophy, the ANSF's main task is to protect the Afghan constitution and to fight the insurgency. However, the Afghan president, who is the

supreme commander of the ANA – as many of his officers and soldiers see it – showed complete disregard for the constitution during the 2009 presidential elections and repeatedly referred to the supposed enemy, the Taliban, as "brothers."

Regarding the architecture of the security sector, the Afghan state is facing further challenges. The three main security organizations – the military, the police, and the intelligence service (National Directorate of Security, NDS) – have overlapping responsibilities and have been structured, trained, and equipped for domestic actions against the insurgency. This creates a strong rivalry between the ANA, ANP, and NDS.

Thus, the uncertainty of future resources, the absence of a clearly defined enemy, as well as the structural shortcomings concerning the overall architecture of the security sector in Afghanistan are major obstacles for developing an identity, increasing the internal cohesion, and boosting the morales of the ANA and the ANP.

Governance. Regarding the Afghan government's assurance of improving its governance performance and fighting corruption, the upcoming presidential elections (scheduled for April 5, 2014) will be a key indicator. After the debacle of the 2009 presidential elections and the Kabul Bank corruption scandal in 2010/11 – to mention only two prominent examples of abuse of the administration – the way that the 2014 elections are prepared and executed will have a decisive impact on the Afghan people's trust in the country's political institutions. According to the Afghan constitution, Hamid Karzai, who has been the only president of post-Taliban Afghanistan, cannot run for a third term.

The peace process. The Afghan peace process – officially launched in 2010 when President Karzai held a National Consultative Peace Jirga and established a High Peace Council (HPC) – has made little progress during the past couple of years. While the Afghan government (respectively the

HPC) was failing at initiating substantial negotiations between the main conflicting parties, the Taliban was achieving propagandistic victories. They rocketed the Peace Jirga and assassinated the chairman of the HPC, former Afghan president Burhanuddin Rabbani.

Until today there have been no substantial negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government, and there is still no road map for peace negotiations that defines topics, participants, mediators, or a time frame for permanent talks (see also SWP Comments 44/2012).

However, the key issue regarding peace talks seems to be that the positions of the government and the Taliban leadership are mutually incompatible. The key demand of the Taliban is a complete withdrawal of all foreign military forces and major changes to the Afghan constitution. They do not even recognize the Karzai government as a negotiating party and have already announced that they will also not recognize the 2014 presidential elections.

Cooperation with neighbors. Beside the United States, Russia, China, and India, most notably Pakistan and Iran are the other key players in Afghanistan. The two countries will probably play a major role in Afghanistan after the drawdown of NATO's combat forces. Related to the NATO strategy, a more cooperative attitude as well as support for the Afghan peace process is required by Pakistan and Iran. A vital question that has rarely been answered is why they should do so. Pakistan has played a double game of astonishing magnitude with the United States and NATO for about a decade. Meanwhile, Iran has successfully implemented anti-US positions into its policy approaches toward Afghanistan – positions that are mainly driven by its own security needs regarding the nuclear dispute. The Afghanistan policies of both Pakistan and Iran have included support for non-state military actors like the Taliban, which has been highlighted in Western debates for years. However, both coun-

tries have not yielded when put under high diplomatic and military pressure by the United States. It is unlikely that they will concede after a US military drawdown in the region and in the light of a possible failure of NATO's Afghanistan strategy.

Economic development. A pre-condition for creating economic development is a minimum of stability and security throughout the country. Regarding this, it is meaningless whether or not NATO declares particular areas of Afghanistan to be stable and secure. The point is whether the Afghan people and investors perceive particular areas as being secure and if they are willing to take the risk to launch new enterprises there. In addition, the Afghan government up to now has failed to provide legal security for international companies that are interested in developing and exploiting Afghanistan's rich deposits of natural resources. In 2012, an appropriate new mining law was rejected by the cabinet, which has since deferred some of the projects that had already been agreed upon. Another point that has an impact on the future economic development of Afghanistan and that has been ignored for quite a long time concerns the demographic upheaval Afghanistan is facing. According to the Population Division of the UN Department of Social and Economic Affairs, Afghanistan will have about 47 million inhabitants by the end of 2024, which is right at the end of the "transformation decade." Even a stable and peaceful country would face serious challenges if its population were to increase from around 32 million to 47 million in just 12 years.

Conclusion

NATO's Afghanistan strategy is based on assumed developments that, until today, have largely not taken place. Regarding the operational qualities of the ANSF and the governance performance of Karzai's government, the litmus test will be the 2014 presidential elections. If the elections take place

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and are widely regarded as free, fair, and transparent, this will strengthen the institutions of the Afghan state and boost the morale of the ANSF. Conversely, if the elections are overshadowed by fraud, bribery, or violence to an extent that makes voting impossible in large parts of the country, the Afghan people might ultimately lose their faith in the post-2001 political system.

As regards the peace process and the policies of Pakistan and Iran, it is likely that the Taleban leadership, as well as the relevant power centers in Islamabad and Tehran, will await the outcome of the presidential elections and wait to see the actual level of engagement by NATO and the United States after 2014. Whether Pakistan and Iran choose a cooperative or aggressive approach for their post-2014 policies depends on whether there is a legitimate Afghan government that has the power to rule the country and whether there is a strong or weak US troop presence beyond 2014. Regarding the Taleban in particular, it will choose between negotiating and fighting.

Remaining options

As NATO's ISAF mission will be concluded in less than two years and support for the war in Afghanistan is continuously dwindling in Western countries, only a few opportunities for action remain. Several events are considered as game changers that could end the current stalemate in Afghanistan. These scenarios include Pakistan's abandonment of its Afghan policy, a substantial change in Iran's approach toward Afghanistan, the emergence of a credible and legitimate leader to replace President Karzai, and the arrest of the senior Taleban leadership, including Mulla Omar. However, NATO and the United States should not focus on Pakistan and Iran at present. The main obstacles for NATO's strategy in Afghanistan are tied to either the Afghan government, represented by President Karzai, or the Taleban and its fabled leader, Mulla Omar. Both leaders are strong symbolic figures, which

the majority of the Afghan people have to choose between.

Having ruled for more than a decade, Karzai symbolizes the post-2001 Afghan state that has lost a lot of its legitimacy and credibility through corruption scandals and electoral fraud in recent years. The fact that he is the supreme commander of the Afghan forces but seen as weak – even among supporters of the new political system – partly explains the lack of cohesion and the vulnerability to enemy infiltration of the ANSF.

Mulla Omar, who has been on the run for about 12 years, is still the undisputed spiritual leader of the Taleban movement. Nearly all Afghan and foreign insurgent or terrorist leaders operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan's tribal areas swore an oath to Mulla Omar and regard him as the *Amir al-Muminin* (Commander of the Faithful). The mere fact that he has resisted the American superpower for more than a decade and is now stalling the United States in the negotiations makes him appear strong, even in the eyes of those Afghans who do not support the Taleban movement.

Taking away these two symbols – through free and transparent elections in the case of Karzai, and through arrest in the case of Mulla Omar – would change the parameters for the external as well as the internal players engaging in the Afghan game. NATO should concentrate all its efforts on supporting the Afghan government in the organization of – and the ANSF in the protection of – the upcoming elections, even if this means leaving some combat troops in the country after April 5, 2014. As a last resort, action against the senior Taleban leadership – with the ideal result of arresting its identity-establishing and unifying symbol, Mulla Omar, and his key lieutenants – should be taken into account. Strengthening the Afghan state and its constitution and weakening the Taleban are key steps on the way to a durable and stable Afghanistan.